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AUTHOR Szamosi, Michael
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ABSTRACT

It is possible to apply the concept of surface-structure constraint to a particular area of Hungarian syntax. A surface-structure constraint, according to David Perlmutter, can be seen as a template which serves as a filter at some level after the transformational component. In the case of Hungarian cooccurrence of noun phrases and verbs in a clause, the constraint operates after the input to the phonological component and determines whether a sentence will be grammatical or not. The constraint declares that, if a clause contains an indefinite noun phrase in the accusative case and a finite verb, the verb has to be in the indefinite conjugation. The constraint operates in addition to the verb-object agreement rule. A similar constraint seems to be operative also in English. (VM)

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ON A SURFACE STRUCTURE CONSTRAINT IN HUNGARIAN

Michael Szamosi

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The present paper deals with the verb-object agreement rule and the wh-movement rule in Hungarian. The results of the interaction of these rules suggest the conclusion that there exists a surface structure constraint which restricts the co-occurrence of noun-phrases and verbs in a clause. It is this constraint which renders some expressions ungrammatical.

First, some facts: Hungarian transitive verbs have two forms of conjugation. One, the indefinite conjugation, is used whenever the direct object of the verb is indefinite (i.e., a noun with an indefinite article egy ("a, one"), plurals without article, etc.). (This conjugation is also used for intransitive verbs; verbs without an object, or with an object in a non-accusative case.) The other, the definite conjugation, is used with syntactically definite direct objects (i.e., with the definite article a, az ("the"), with possessive forms, proper names, etc.). Thus:

1. a. Akart egy könyvet

He wanted_{Ind} a book-Acc

He wanted a book.

b. Akarta a könyvet

He wanted_{Def} the book-Acc

He wanted the book.

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c. *Akarta egy könyvet

He wanted_{Def}

d. *Akart a könyvet

He wanted_{Ind}

It is reasonable to suppose, then, that there exists a rule of verb-object agreement in Hungarian. The exact mechanics of the rule will not concern us here.

Sentential (direct object) complements are syntactically definite. That is, a verb which has a tensed that-clause as its direct object, is definite:

2. a. János akarta, hogy (el)hozzak egy könyvet¹
 John wanted_{Def} that I bring_{Ind} a book-Acc.
 John wanted me to bring a book.

b. *János akart hogy (el)hozzak egy könyvet
 wanted_{Ind}

In ordinary relative clauses, where the relativized NP is a direct object (Accusative)², the verb always shows up in its indefinite form, regardless of the definiteness of the head noun.

3. a. Egy könyv amit akart
 A book which-Acc he wanted_{Ind}
 A book which he wanted

b. A könyv amit akart
 The book which-Acc he wanted_{Ind}
 The book which he wanted

The facts of (3)-(6) can be captured by postulating that the wh-words mit and amit are syntactically indefinite, while melyik(et) and amelyiket are definite, at least at that point in the derivation, where the verb-object agreement rule applies.³ Note, incidentally, that it is not the case that the verbs in (3)-(6) just agree with the accusative NP in their clause.

Consider:

7. Ez az a könyv amelyiket János akarta hogy elhozzam.

This that the book which_{2Acc} John wanted_{Def} that I bring_{Def}

This is the book which John wanted me to bring.

Here, akarta is definite for the same reason it is definite in 2, it has a sentential direct object. Elhozzam is also definite, but this has to be attributed to amelyiket. Since it is unlikely that elhozzam in the embedded clause is agreeing with amelyiket in the matrix sentence, 7 suggests that verb-object agreement precedes wh-movement.

In the following, we shall not be concerned with melyiket and amelyiket. They were brought in to illustrate the above ordering, which would have been harder using mit and amit.

I will now turn to constructions using mit and amit, in which the NP's represented by these (i.e., the questioned or relativized NP's) originate in an embedded sentence. Some of these are grammatical, while others are not. First consider a subject-embedding matrix verb kell ("is necessary").

8. Az, hogy elhozzam a könyvet, kell.

It that I bring_{Def} the book-Acc is necessary.

It is necessary that I bring the book.

The fact that the embedded clause "that I bring the book" precedes the verb, and the fact that the expletive az (Rosenbaum's IT) is nominative, indicate that kell is a subject-embedding verb. 8 is grammatical if the sentence "that I bring the book" is emphasized. Usually, however, this clause is extraposed:

9. (Az) kell, hogy elhozzam a könyvet.

(It) is necessary that I bring the book.

Once this happens, the accusative NP, könyvet, can be freely questioned, or relativized:

10. Mit kell, hogy elhozzak?

What-Acc is necessary that I bring_{Ind}.

What is it necessary for me to bring?

11. {_A
Egy} könyv, amit kell, hogy elhozzak.

{_{The}
A} book which-Acc is necessary that I bring_{Ind}.

{_{The}
A} book which it is necessary for me to bring.

So, we have no problem with wh-words pulled out of a subject complement.

Consider next, clauses embedded under a NP which is in an oblique case. The verb fél ("be afraid of") is an intransitive, whose object is in a non-accusative case. Thus, we have:

12. Félsz a kutyától.

You are afraid the dog-of.

You are afraid of the dog.

Now, if, instead of kutya ("dog") we have a sentential object, we get

13. Félsz, hogy ellopom a könyvet⁴
You are afraid that I steal_{Def} the book-Acc
You are afraid that I will steal the book.

Again, relativization and questioning of the object of the embedded sentence is quite free:

14. Mit félsz, hogy ellopok?
What-Acc you are afraid that I steal_{Ind}?
What are you afraid that I'll steal?

15. {_A} könyv amit félsz, hogy ellopok.
 {_{The}} book which-Acc you are afraid that I steal_{Ind}.
 {_A}
 {_{The}} book which you are afraid that I'll steal.

We begin to get into problems with the regular, direct-object-embedding verbs, like akar ("want"). Given a sentence:

16. Akarta, hogy elhozzam a könyvet.
He wanted_{Def} that I bring_{Def} the book-Acc.
He wanted me to bring the book.

We find that the object of the embedded sentence cannot be relativized or questioned with amit or mit. So, in opposition to 7, we have:

17. {_A} könyv amit akarta, hogy elhozzak.
 {_{The}} book which-Acc he wanted_{Def} that I bring_{Ind}.
 {_A}
 {_{The}} book which he wanted me to bring.

18. *Mit akarta hogy elhozzak?

What-Acc he wanted_{Def} that I bring_{Ind}?

What did he want me to bring?

An indefinite matrix verb in 17, 18 is also ungrammatical, which is predictable, since we know (from 2) that sentential direct objects require a definite matrix verb:

19. * $\left\{ \begin{smallmatrix} A \\ Egy \end{smallmatrix} \right\}$ könyv amit akart, hogy elhozzak.
wanted_{Ind}

20. *Mit akart, hogy elhozzak?⁵.
wanted_{Ind}

We have to explain, then, why 17 and 18 are ungrammatical. Before jumping to premature conclusions, let us examine one more type of embedding, which will give us a clue to what's going on. The verb kér [or megkér (see fn. 1.)], ("ask") appears in the following construction (meg)kér NP-Acc [that S] NP. The NP dominating the complement sentence is in a non-accusative case, which shows up if the expletive (Rosenbaum's IT) shows up, but we will be concerned with forms without an expletive for the reason explained in footnote 4. The important thing to note is that it is the lexical NP (NP-Acc, above) that the matrix verb agrees with in definiteness (i.e., its direct object). Thus, we have the following alternation:

21. Megkérte őt, hogy hozza el a könyvet.
 He asked_{Def} she-Acc that she bring_{Def} the book-Acc.
 He asked her to bring the book.

22. Megkért engem, hogy hozzam el a könyvet.
 He asked_{Ind} I-acc that I bring_{Def} the book.
 He asked me to bring the book.

This alternation is due to the difference between őt ("she-Acc") and engem ("me(Acc)"). It is just one of those crazy facts about Hungarian, that the 3rd person accusative form of the pronoun is syntactically definite, while the others are indefinite. So the alternation in (21, 22) is the same as in

23. Akarta őt.
 He wanted_{Def} her
 wanted

24. Akart engem.
 He wanted_{Ind} me
 He wanted me.

(which, of course, is the same as that exhibited in 1.) The reason I introduced the minor wrinkle of using pronouns instead of nouns is that, for completely irrelevant reasons, 21 and 22 cannot be used for my purposes if they contain an overt direct object in the matrix clause. This can be gotten around by using pronouns, which are deletable:

25. Megkérte, hogy hozza el a könyvet.
 He asked_{Def}(her) that she bring_{Def} the book-Acc.
 He asked her to bring the book.

26. Megkért, hogy hozzam el a könyvet.
 He asked_{Ind}(me) that I bring_{Def} the book-Acc.
 He asked me to bring the book.

25 and 26 are completely synonymous with 21 and 22, respectively; they contain no overt direct object, so we can proceed with illustrating the point. Consider now what happens when the direct object of the embedded clause is wh-fronted. From a structure parallel to 25, we get:

27. ^A_{Egy} } könyv amit megkérte, hogy hozzon el.
 ^{The}_A } book which-Acc he asked_{Def}(her) that she bring_{Ind}.
 ^{The}_A } book which he asked her to bring.

and

28. *Mit kérte meg, hogy hozzon el?
 What-acc he asked_{Def}(her) that she bring.
 What did he ask her to bring?

And from 26:

29. ^A_{Egy} könyv amit megkért, hogy hozzak el.
 ^{The}_A book which-Acc he asked_{Ind}(me) that I bring_{Ind}.
 ^{The}_A book which he asked me to bring.
 30. Mit kért meg, hogy hozzak el?
 What-Acc he asked_{Ind}(me) that I bring_{Ind}.
 What did he ask me to bring?

Now, if we look at 17, 18, 27 and 28 which are all ungrammatical as opposed to 29 and 30, which are fine, we find a very simple generalization: wh-fronting, involving the wh-words mit and amit from an embedded clause, results in an ungrammatical sentence, if the matrix verb (the verb which is in the same clause as the head noun) is definite. This generalization will also account for the grammaticality of all the cases shown previously: 10, 11, 14 and 15. The matrix verbs in these sentences are intransitive, i.e., they lack a direct object, and consequently, they "take" the indefinite forms only, as was pointed out on p. 1. The generalization also reflects, to some extent, the native speaker's intuition about the ungrammatical sentences: the wrongness is "felt" to be centered, somehow, on the matrix verb -- one doesn't quite know whether it should be definite or indefinite.

Having arrived at a generalization, our next problem is to represent it in the grammar. A rather ad-hoc way of doing it would be to place a restriction on WH-movement; (A) Wh-movement of a direct object from an embedded clause involving indefinite wh-words is blocked if the verb of the clause which contains the head noun is definite. This of course, is just a restatement of the generalization. Another point which shows up the ad-hocness of this proposal is that wh-fronting is not the only rule which needs a condition like this. There exists in Hungarian a rule which I will call Emph-movement, which takes

any emphasized NP in a string and moves it to a position just in front of the main verb. So from 31 we get 32:

31. János akarta, **hogy** menjek a moziba.
John wanted_{Def} that I go the cinema-to.
John wanted me to go to the movies.
32. A moziba akarta János, **hogy** menjek.
The cinema-to wanted_{Def} John that I go.
It was to the movies that John wanted me to go.

This transformation, when applied to direct objects of embedded clauses, will have results similar to that of wh-movement. Operating on the structures underlying 9, 13 and 26, it will give 33, 34, and 35, respectively, which are grammatical:

33. A könyvet kell, hogy elhozzam.
The book-Acc is necessary that I bring.
It is the book that it is necessary for me to bring.
34. A könyvet félsz, hogy ellopom.
The book-Acc you are afraid that I steal.
It is the book that you're afraid that I'll steal.
35. A könyvet kért meg, hogy hozzam el.
The book-Acc he asked (me) that I bring.
It was the book that he asked me to bring.

33, 34, and 35 are also grammatical if we replace the definite NP a könyvet ("the book-Acc") with the indefinite NP egy könyvet

("a book-Acc"). Now when Emph-movement operates on the structures underlying 16 and 25 we still have grammatical sentences:

36. A könyvet akarta, hogy elhozzam.
The book-Acc he wanted_{Def} that I bring_{Def}.
It was the book that he wanted me to bring.

37. A könyvet kérte meg, hogy hozza el.
The book-Acc he asked_{Def}(her) that she bring_{Def}.
It was the book that he asked her to bring.

But here, if we replace a könyvet by egy könyvet, we get ungrammatical sentences:

38. *Egy könyvet akarta hogy elhozzak.
A book-Acc he wanted_{Def} that I bring_{Ind}.
It was a book that he wanted me to bring.

39. *Egy könyvet kérte meg, hogy hozzon el.
A book-Acc he asked_{Def}(her) that she bring_{Ind}.
It was a book that he asked her to bring.

Although, if the matrix verb is indefinite, as in 29 or 30, the sentences are again grammatical:

40. Egy könyvet kért meg hogy hozzak el.
A book-Acc he asked_{Ind}(me) that I bring_{Ind}.
It was a book that he asked me to bring.

Thus, the situation is exactly analogous to that of the indefinite wh-words.

One could, of course, just as easily place a condition on Emph-movement: (A'): Emph-movement of an indefinite direct object from an embedded clause is blocked if the main verb is definite.

It is obvious that the two conditions, (A) and (A'), are the same, and that we are missing a generalization. The generalization seems to be that an indefinite accusative NP cannot end up in the same clause with a definite verb. One could argue, then, that what is needed is a general condition on movement rules which will prevent indefinite direct objects from being moved into a clause containing a definite verb. It can be shown, however, that such a constraint will not work, unless we put a completely unmotivated condition on the constraint itself.

There is a consistent class of exceptions to the above generalization. It consists of those sentences in which the matrix verb is in the first person, singular, of the past indicative, or in the first person, plural, of the present conditional. Sentences 17, 18, 27, 28, 38, 39, which were ungrammatical above, turn out to be grammatical if their matrix verb is in one of the above forms. For example, to take just the counterparts of 17 and 38:

41. A könyv amit akarnánk, hogy elhozzon.
The book which-Acc we would want that he bring.
The book which we would want him to bring.

42. Egy könyvet akartam hogy elhozzon.
A book-Acc I wanted that he bring.
It was a book that I wanted him to bring.

At first this seems like a totally crazy fact. However, it is not an accident that it is these forms, and only these forms that are grammatical. It is exactly in these cases, namely in the first person singular of the past indicative, and the first person plural of the present conditional, that the definite and indefinite conjugations collapse, -- they exhibit phonologically identical shapes. So in 40 and 41 the forms akarnánk and akartam, belong to both the definite and the indefinite conjugations.⁶

In order to save the proposal for placing the conditions (A) and (A') on wh-movement and Emph-movement, respectively, we have to put an identical exception clause on both: the rules block under the circumstances indicated in the conditions, unless the matrix verb is in the first person, singular, of the past indicative or in the first person, plural, of the present conditional. It should be clear that something obvious is being missed. The exception clause is the same in both (A) and (A'), it is totally unmotivated, and it fails to connect up in any way the fact that the very forms mentioned in it are the ones which exhibit no difference in the two conjugations.

This line of thought seems to have two consequences. First, it seems that the generalization that we are trying to express in the grammar has been somewhat loosely stated. Above, (p. 13) I stated that the generalization following from the two separate conditions seems to be that an indefinite accusative NP cannot end up in the same clause with a definite verb. But, given the class of exceptions that we have considered, it seems that

they can be incorporated into a more correct generalization, namely, that an indefinite accusative NP cannot be in the same clause with a verb which is not in the indefinite conjugation. This formulation covers the cases covered by the earlier generalization, and the sentences which were exceptions to the latter are no longer exceptions, since the verbal forms in them are in the indefinite conjugation (as well as in the definite one).

Second, if this is indeed the right generalization, then it is impossible to state it in the way that was suggested earlier. The generalization is a statement about a surface phenomenon; it makes crucial use of the accidental phonological collapsing of certain distinct forms. Since verb-object agreement precedes wh-movement,⁷ we expect that all verbal forms, including the first person singular of the past indicative, etc. are, in some way, marked as definite by the time wh-movement applies. Thus, there is no way to constrain wh-movement or Emph-movement except in the highly unnatural way outlined above. In fact, the generalization cannot be stated on a transformational level, since the transformation cannot "know" about the surface form of the verb.⁸

What I propose, then, is that there exists in Hungarian, a surface structure constraint, in the sense of Perlmutter (1968). The constraint states that:

43. if a clause contains an indefinite NP in the accusative case, and a finite verb, the verb has to be in the indefinite conjugation.

Perlmutter's conception of a surface structure constraint, for which he has argued extensively, is that of a template, which serves as a filter. In other words, at some level after the transformational component (in this case after the input to the phonological component), the surface phrase-marker is matched against such a template. If it meets the conditions of the template, the sentence will be grammatical. If it doesn't, it won't. Applied in this way, 43 will correctly prevent 17, 18, 27, 28, 38, and 39 from being generated, while allowing 41 and 42, because the verbs in 41 and 42 are in the indefinite conjugation, which is what matters for "passing through" (43), regardless of the fact that they happen to be in the definite conjugation as well.

There is one more point which illustrates this proposal: a conjoined sentence is usually ungrammatical if either conjunct is. Thus:

44. *János elhozta azt a könyvet amit én akartam,
 John brought_{Def} that-Acc the book-Acc which-Acc I wanted,
 John brought the book which I wanted
- hogy elhozzon, de nem azt amit te akartad,
 that he bring_{Ind}, but not that-Acc which-Acc you wanted_{Def}
 him to bring but not the one which you wanted
- hogy elhozzon.
 that he bring_{Ind}.
 him to bring.

It seems, then, that we can do away with the straw-man "condition-on-the-rule" hypothesis, and accept the proposed surface structure constraint. The statement of the constraint is far from exact and its scope of operation is not quite clear. It seems that the greater the distance between the indefinite accusative NP and the verb, the less powerful the constraint. For example,

46. ?*Itt van a könyv amit péntek este megkérte
 Here is the book which_{Acc} Friday evening he asked of
 Here is the book which he asked her (her)

 hogy hozzon el.
 that she bring_{Ind}.
 to bring, on Friday evening.

Assuming "Friday evening" modifies "ask", this sentence sounds much better than 27, in which there was no "material" intervening between amit and megkérte. Obviously, the foregoing discussion only touches the tip of the iceberg; it is a tug at one little corner of the tangled mess of Hungarian grammar.

There remain a couple of interesting side-issues worth remarking. As noted in footnote 5., 19 and 20, which have indefinite matrix verbs, sound somewhat better than 17 and 18. In fact when a speaker starts to say a relative clause like 19 or 17, he will usually come out with the 19 version of it, although, if later confronted with 19, he will say that it is ungrammatical. The ungrammaticality of 19 stems from the fact, as noted above,

This ungrammaticality can be accounted for both by the "condition-on-the-rule" hypothesis, and by the surface structure constraint. (44) is rather redundant. In Hungarian, as in many other languages, it is possible to delete parts of a conjunct which are identical to parts of the other conjunct(s). Unlike English, however, Hungarian permits the deletion of the verb. Thus, we get

45. János elhozta azt a könyvet amit én akartam.

John brought_{Def} that_{Acc} the book_{Acc} which_{Acc} I wanted
 ?John brought the book which I wanted

hogy elhozzon, de nem azt amit te.

that he bring, but not that_{Acc} which_{Acc} you.

but not the one that you did.

In this sentence, the matrix verb, along with its complement has been deleted in the second conjunct. (45) is grammatical, which is not predicted by the "condition-on-the-rule" hypothesis. Deletion in the derivation of 45 occurs after wh-movement, i.e., after the stage illustrated by 44. So there is nothing to "correct" the ungrammaticality of 44 in passing on to 45. According to that hypothesis, then, 45 should be as ungrammatical as 44. The surface structure condition, on the other hand, predicts that 45 will be grammatical while 44 will not. The reason is that, in deleting the verb of the second conjunct, we have eliminated the "offending element". There being no verb, the clause cannot run afoul of the surface structure constraint, so it ~~is~~ grammatical.⁹

that the verb-object agreement rule has been violated. The sentence fits the surface structure constraint, however, while in 17, it is the constraint that is violated. It seems that given the choice between violating a rule and conforming to the constraint, on the one hand, and conforming to the rule and violating the constraint, on the other, the speaker will opt for the former. What makes this interesting is that the same thing seems to be going on in English. Perlmutter, (ibid), has argued for the existence of a surface structure constraint in English, which throws out any tensed clause which does not have a subject. This accounts for the ungrammaticality of 47:

47. *I used this butter, which I don't know whether is good

Here the NP butter appears, in deep structure, as the subject of the clause: whether this butter is good. After wh-movement this NP appears only as the wh-word which, which is moved into the matrix clause, the clause is left without a subject, and is thrown out by the constraint. Note that wh-movement, in English, does not leave a pronominal copy of the relativized NP in the relative clause. We have the book which I read, but not *the book which I read it. Nevertheless, when someone starts to say the sentence which is approximated by 47, he will almost invariably come out with:

48. *I used this butter which I don't know whether it's good.

This is also ungrammatical, but to most speakers it sounds better than 47. Thus, when an English speaker is faced with the same choice, he will make the same "decision".

Lastly, I would like to point out the peculiar nature of this surface structure constraint. What is interesting is that Hungarian has this constraint in addition to the verb-object agreement rule. The constraint seems to be "checking up" on the rule, but in one direction only. That is, this constraint refers only to indefinite NP's -- it has no counterpart saying that definite NP's have to co-occur with verbs in the definite conjugation. I have a feeling that something is lurking behind this asymmetry, but I have no idea what it is.

Footnotes

*I would like to thank David Perlmutter for many valuable comments and discussions relating to this work, one of which sparked the central idea in the paper. My thanks go also to Robert Vago for his time as my "checking" informant, and his comments, and to Arlene Berman for her helpful criticisms.

1. In 2, the form el, in parentheses, is a verbal affix, denoting aspect (more or less). The presence or absence of this affix, and its position with respect to the verb are irrelevant, and will not concern us. The same goes for the affix meg in 21.
2. In the following, all references to relative clauses and wh-questions will be to forms in which the relativized or questioned NP is a direct object (Accusative). These are the only type that I'm concerned with in this paper.
3. On the definiteness vs. indefiniteness of wh-words, see Browne (1970a, 1970b).
4. The NP dominating the sentence that I will steal the book in 13 is indeed in the same oblique case as kutya in 12. This can be seen in the (near) variant of 13: Attól félsz, hogy ellopom a könyvet. Attól is the surface form of az+tól, where az is the same expletive that occurs in 8, and tól is the same case-marker as the one on kutya in 12. In fact, most embedded sentences have such an expletive, which is deleted under certain conditions. Obviously, I am interested only in the cases where it is deleted; otherwise the embedded clauses considered here will be complex noun-phrases, in which case wh-movement can't apply to them.
5. 19 and 20 are somewhat better than 12 and 18 and, in some dialects, they are even grammatical. I will return to this point later.
6. It has been pointed out to me by Stephen Anderson that, in Robert Vago's treatment of the morphology and phonology of Hungarian verbal endings, (Vago 1970), it was necessary to set up two ad-hoc rules -- to wit, that the indefinite form of the first person singular in the past indicative takes an ending which, in other tenses, is taken only by the definite form. The same goes for the first person plural of the present conditional. If the proper endings were taken, the resulting surface forms would be akartak and akarnák. These forms, however, exist already for the third person plural of the above tenses. Anderson has suggested that, in order to avoid ambiguity of person, Hungarian has "opted" to endure ambiguity of definiteness.

7. Although I have not explicitly pointed it out, it is obvious that the verb-object agreement rule also precedes Emph-movement. It is enough to note that we have a definite form of the embedded verb in 36 and 37, corresponding to the definite NP a könyvet, as opposed to an indefinite form in 40, corresponding to the indefinite NP egy könyvet.
8. It can't even be stated as a derivational constraint. None of the proponents of this device have, to my knowledge, suggested the existence of "transcomponential constraints" which need to refer to both the syntactic and the phonological components. Even with such an unwarranted extension of the concept, to account for the phenomena discussed above by a derivational constraint would be missing the point -- these are surface phenomena. David Perlmutter has brought to my attention the existence of other cases in which the syntactic well-formedness of an utterance depends on phonological information.
9. This last argument is essentially the same, in form, as one of the arguments given in Perlmutter (1968) to establish the existence of a surface structure constraint on the order of clitic pronouns in Spanish.

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